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Social Media and the Problem of Echo Chambers

In our modern era social media seems to be everywhere, and everyone seems to be using it in one way or another. Some people use it to communicate with loved ones who live a world away, while others use it to follow things related to their hobbies. In many ways social media can be a wonderful tool to communicate with others; however, there is one issue in particular that seems to always work its way into every discussion on social media: politics. When it comes to politics, social media users tend to surround themselves with ‘yes men:’ people that believe the same things that they do and tell them how much they agree with them. When they do so, they push away and reject views and opinions that do not follow their own, creating so-called ‘echo chambers.’ There has been some debate on whether or not echo chambers even exist, and how much of an impact they have on social media. Echo chambers do exist, and by locking themselves into these echo chambers social media users are not engaging their critical thinking skills, and that is a problem.

Echo chambers, as the name suggests, are sections of the internet and social media where one view (or multiple related views) are echoed back and forth constantly. C. Thi Nguyen, an assistant professor with Utah Valley University who is working with social epistemology, defines an echo chamber as follows: “An ‘echo chamber’ is a social structure from which other relevant voices have been actively discredited. . . In echo chambers, other voices are actively undermined” (Nguyen). By undermining and discrediting opposing viewpoints, we are not

engaging with them. Even if you strongly disagree with those views, engaging with them can allow one to see where those views came from which allows us to view the other person as just that: another person, rather than an ideological enemy.

In argumentation, when we view each other as fellow humans and are respectful to one another we can change people's minds. Research in the last few years has shown that a method called "deep canvassing" can help change people's views. In an interview with Vox, researcher David Broockman stated "Twitter is obviously full of the notion that what we should do is condemn those who disagree with us. What we can now say experimentally, the key to the success of these conversations is doing the exact opposite of that" (Resnick). The study conducted by Broockman and other researchers showed that having an honest and nonjudgmental conversation with voters helped change their minds. The canvassers would ask voters open-ended questions, and even if they did not like or agree with the answers they were given they were told to listen and engage them, and to be interested in what they had to say. The the research showed that this technique worked to change people's views (Resnick). However, on social media, this kind of honest engagement does not occur. Instead, we banish those we disagree with and cheer on those we agree with, which only further polarizes everyone.

There have been some who have argued that social media echo chambers simply do not exist, or are very minimal in the grand scheme of things. In an article published by the BBC, media editor Amol Rajan explores the idea that echo chambers do not exist to the degree many believe. In the article, Mr. Rajan interviews Oxford professor Dr. Grant Blank, who argues that when looking at just one social media platform at a time (such as only looking at Facebook, or only looking at Twitter), you can easily point out echo chambers, but if you look at the Internet as a whole, people are consuming enough media from different sources that they are being

exposed to opposing viewpoints and changing their minds (Rajan). While it is true that people consume media from many different sources, echo chambers do exist, and people do not simply change their minds when presented with opposing views.

Even when presented with opposing points of view or evidence that challenges those points of view people do not simply change their minds. In multiple Stanford studies published in the 1970s it was found that when people are given the impression that they are correct they will likely continue to think they are correct, even if evidence suggests otherwise (Kolbert). In one of the studies, students were given suicide notes, some of which were real and some of which were fake, and were asked to identify which notes were real and which notes were fake. Some of the students were incorrectly told that they were correct most of the time, whether they were or not, and others were told the truth. The students were then told the real intent behind the study and asked how they thought they compared to the average student. Despite having no basis to believe their scores were better (since they had been told their scores were fake), the students with the higher (fake) scores believed they had scored better overall than the average student (Kolbert). In the context of the modern Internet, what this study reveals is that when we do see opposing viewpoints, including those backed with scientific evidence, we are so certain of our own views that we do not change our minds.

By and large, social media users remain within their own ‘camps.’ In a peer reviewed study published in September 2021, researchers with Indiana University tested this trend. The researchers developed 15 “drifters” as they called them, which were politically neutral automated bots. The bots were then made to follow an initial Twitter page. According to the study, “each Twitter account used as a first friend a popular news source aligned with the Left, Center-Left, Center, Center-Right, or Right of the U.S. political spectrum” (Chen, et al.). The bots were then

monitored as they interacted with Twitter users, and after approximately six months data was collected and evaluated. In particular, the researchers looked at:

- (1) the number of followers of each drifter to compare their ability to gain influence; (2) the echo-chamber exposure of each drifter; (3) the likely automated activities of friends and followers of the drifters; (4) the proportion of low-credibility information to which the drifters are exposed; and (5) the political alignment of the content generated by the drifters and their friends to probe political biases. (Chen, et al.)

Once all of the data was evaluated it was revealed that the bots mostly continued to follow and interact with content that matched the political leanings of the initial news source they followed, thus putting themselves into echo chambers. While it should be noted that the behavior of the bots is just that, the behavior of bots, this same concept can be applied to human interaction on the internet.

Studies have been conducted into how exactly humans interact on social media in regards to politics. One such study, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, shows that just as the automated bots fell into echo chambers, so do humans. The study analyzed user interactions on Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Gab (different topics were chosen for each of these websites, such as gun control, vaccines, abortion, etc.), and compared the political homogeneity and information bias on those websites. The study found that on Twitter and Facebook, users from both the left and the right of the political spectrum remained distinctly segregated into communities that followed their respective points of view, while on Reddit and Gab, user interactions were more homogenous across the websites; however, it was found that as a whole Reddit had a left leaning bias and Gab had a right leaning bias (Cinelli, et al.). Overall

bias on social media websites also contributes to the development of echo chambers on those sites.

In a study published by Pew Research about news use on social media, demographics for certain social media platforms was provided which shows strong biases. From the study's demographics, a surprisingly high 79% of Reddit users identified as Democrats, or leaning Democrat, compared to only 21% who identified as Republicans or leaning Republican (Shearer). Instagram and Twitter were also similarly Democrat biased, with 64% and 65% of users surveyed identifying as Democrats, respectively (Shearer). The study does show Facebook as much more diverse in its demographics; however, as discussed previously, Facebook is one of the most politically segregated platforms, as despite the diversity in views, people still huddle into their echo chambers (Cinelli, et al.). When websites like Reddit and Twitter become one large echo chamber it pushes away people with opposing views, and those people that are being pushed away relocate to websites like Gab where they create their own echo chamber, thus continuing the cycle.

Echo chambers are a dangerous phenomenon on the Internet. By blocking out opposing points of view and shutting them down, we dehumanize each other and only view those with different outlooks as ideological enemies. When we view each other as ideological enemies we only further cement the growing divide in our society. Going forward, as social media continues to grow more and more influential in western society, echo chambers will likely continue to grow and cause more and more societal polarization. However, if we can begin to open our minds to one another, treat each other and our differing views respectfully and think more critically about how we argue on the Internet, perhaps echo chambers will become a thing of the past.

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